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SOROLLA
THE PAINTER OF SUNLIGHT

BY DUNCAN C. PHILLIPS, JR.

WHATEVER rank may ultimately be awarded to Sorolla when, from the proper perspective, the history of pictorial art in our period has been written, of one distinction at least he seems sure. The art chroniclers of the future could scarcely fail to remember that he was the first to successfully transcribe the effect of dazzling unclouded sunlight.

I say successfully, for the attempt has been made repeatedly ever since Turner put the noon-day sun overhead. Claude Monet and his associates then elaborated on this theme. Monet made the painting of sunlight his main object in life and it is to him that the credit is already given for raising the key of color to the semblance of the radiant world out of doors. He wished to remind us that light contains the constituents of color, that shadows are not brown and opaque, but transparent spaces of intercepted light; that under a bright sun forms lose their outlines, and that objects are constantly undergoing change of tone under the modifying or transfiguring influence of atmosphere. He also achieved the optical illusion of air that seems to shimmer and quiver by his juxtaposition of the colors of the spectrum, laid on the canvas in gobs fresh from the tubes, the eye allowed to do its own blending. Standing at a safe distance, we do get the desired effects. But the problem of representing sunlight was not solved. Some valuable observations that laid a scientific foundation for the *Luminarists* of the future, were merely stated. It is an imperfect workmanship that flaunts its method, especially when that method takes no thought of intrinsic beauty, but only of demonstrable truth. Like the crude mechanical contrivance of the small boy which suggests, through some precocious flash of intuition, an important discovery of the means to an end, Monet's system at once amused and fascinated the art world and attracted the careful study and experiment of all progressive landscape painters.

Joaquin Sorolla, a modern of the moderns, was enthusiastic from the first over the ambitious adventures of not only Manet, but also Monet. He did not choose, however, to carry on any farther their experimental technique. Adopting merely their sound principles and profiting by their valuable suggestions, he set to work to make sunshine that should be beautiful as well as truthful, and expressive of his own joyous emotion in the presence of nature, as well as of his scientific interest in natural phenomena. It is true that he has come to his task at a time when the public has at last been taught in the school of Monet to comprehend the purpose of the modern open-air painting. But whereas Monet's so-called *Pointillisme,* because of its messy surfaces, had to fight its way to recognition, Sorolla's more legitimate brush work has won nothing but praise. And the trick has been turned —for not only are the best of the Spaniard's canvases enjoyable even at close range for their beauty of color, but the sun is there as true to life as the mere artifice of painting can make it.

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LEONESE PEASANTS — JOAQUIN SOROLLA Y BASTIDA

COURTESY OF THE HISPANIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA

The study of Sorolla's sunny pictures reveals a bold brush work not unlike Sargent's, and an enthusiastic observation of the aspects of various surfaces under the ever changing moods of the air. This study of the actual degrees of light and dark in the local color of objects, as modulated by the varying degrees of light and dark in the atmosphere, this study not of arbitrary chiaroscuro, but of actual values, has been the sole concern of modern realists, the foundation of their principle and the justification of their practice. But it is a study as old as Velasquez, who in the seventeenth century modelled forms and fused colors in natural lights better than it has ever been done since his day. It was from this great compatriot that Sorolla derived his inspiration. On the occasion of a recent visit I asked him what picture he considered the greatest in the world. He replied promptly, as I expected, the "Las Meninas" of Velasquez. Then I knew, from the enthusiasm in his eyes, how strong is his love for the beauty of truth.

There are times when this disciple needs to remember that the Master Impressionist never revealed by a too unguarded method the actual labors of his hand, when the creation was as yet in the making. It has been the virtue of Sorolla's realism that the cleverness of his technique has generally been concealed in the beauty of his subject. Of late, however, I have noticed a striving for effect, a tendency to commit himself to the creation of luminous sensations, regardless of the cost. In his studio hangs a picture of his wife swimming, which he will neither sell nor even exhibit, so intimate a part of him has it become. The picture is simply sea and swimmer. When we have leaned far out over the deck-rail of a ship and looked down we have seen just such effects; the rhythm of the swimmer's stroke, the agi-

tation of the waters, the curious color as the amber sunlight glimmers with oily luster on the dark green waves. Near this, at the time of my visit, was a still larger canvas upon which he was yet working; a picture of three women in sun-flecked, summery dresses of white and pink, stretched out full length on the sun bathed grass in poses eloquent of utter, irresistible relaxation, once more as if seen from above. I fairly gasped at the daring of this point of view and Sorolla laughed and stroked his hands and exclaimed, *"C'est terrible, ça"*—which being interpreted meant—the illusion is quite overpowering, as I wished it to be.

But even pictures so audacious in conception, so astonishing in execution, may leave something to be desired. It is all very well that picture-making is now so expert a craft that with immense satisfaction we can look down through the frame of a picture as we would look down from a ship's deck upon the sea, or from an upper window upon the lawn below, and see nothing but water, or nothing but grass. But if pictures are henceforward to be devoted to grass and water as seen under certain conditions, let us make sure that the conditions are conducive to beauty. That the pictures I have cited as examples of this creative bravado are, in spite of it, attractive I cannot deny. But just a little more recklessness, or just a little less skill, and they would be merely sensational.

At his best Sorolla combines truth and beauty in a very exceptional way. His distinctive achievement is the effect of sunlight on white—white skin, white sails, white dresses, white walls. His whites are never twice alike, but they speak vividly of various sorts of sunlight on various sorts of surfaces and edges. There are no splatter-dashes to offend the sensitive, but from Monet or from experience he has learned that a

MENDING SAILS JOAQUIN SOROLLA Y BASTIDA

GALLERY OF MODERN ART AT VENICE

slight mixture with pure white pigment of yellow or vermilion for parts in light, and of violet or blue for parts in shadow, will produce the illusion of air that sparkles with sunbeams. His sunlight on darker tones is equally successful; on the brown skins of little naked boys that race up and down his Valencian sea beaches, and on the orange trees and flame-red soil of his Andalusian orchards. In many of his small landscapes there are such glorious colors that one thinks of the great Venetians of the Renaissance. I often wonder how Sorolla escaped being like Frank Brangwyn in England, a great decorator. But after all, it is the study of sunlight that is his ruling passion and the representation of sunlight his supreme achievement. Being emphatically "school of Monet" he is chiefly interested in the luminous scintillating colors of the air; being also Sorolla, in the power of atmosphere to convert the commonplace and the casual into the esthetically delightful.

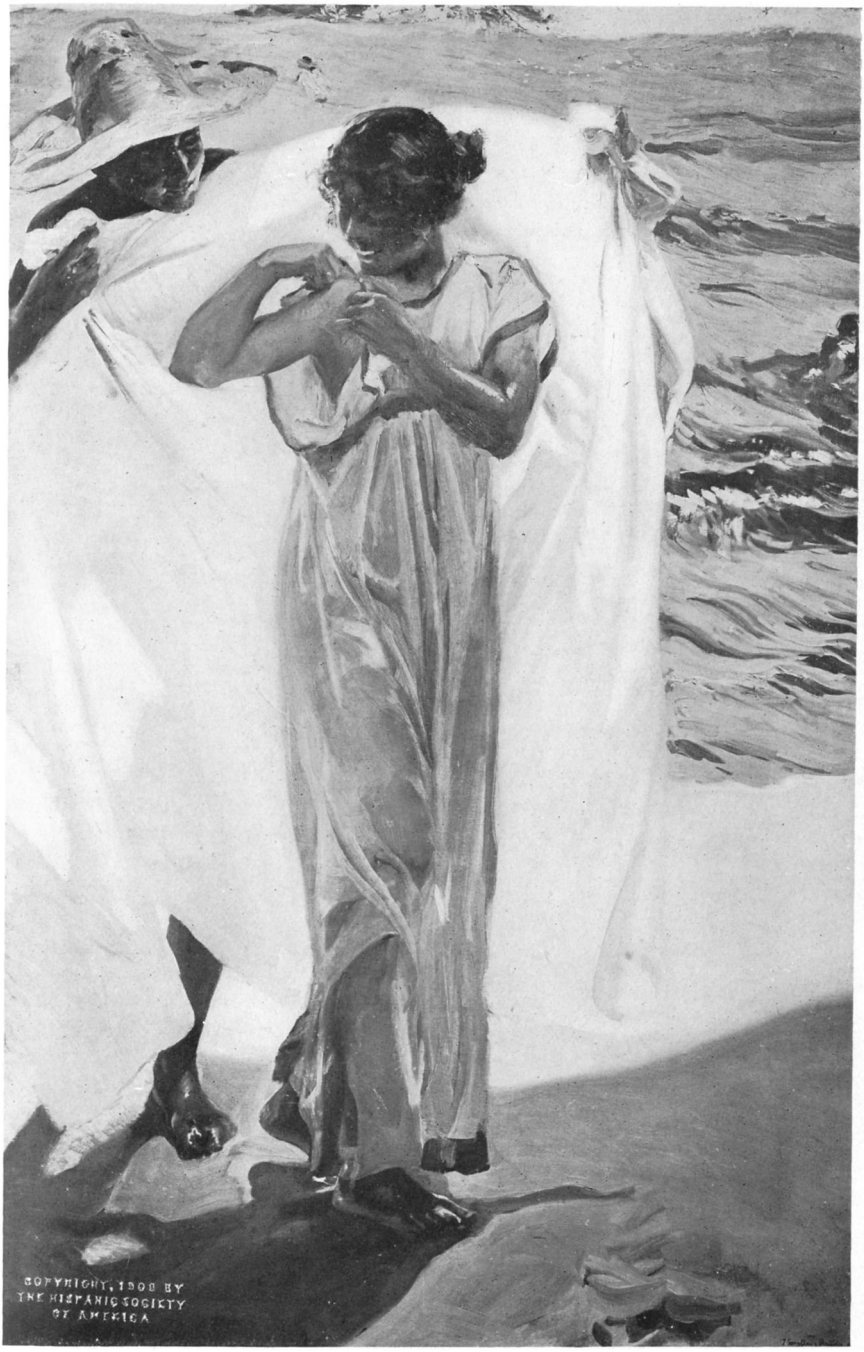
It is the joy that Sorolla puts into his pictures that makes their sunshine so irresistible. We all know solemn persons who are "Epicureans" because, it is necessary that they should be something in several syllables; and other people who talk aggressively about their right to be happy as if every one disputed it; and others who cannot convince us that they know happiness when they see it, although they are perpetually hilarious and having a good time.

Now Claude Monet painted sunlight so scientifically compounded of solar beams that it made us hot around the collar, and dazzled our eyes. Yet he never made us feel, as I hope we all have felt on summer days, that this is the best of all possible worlds and that the golden sun is chiefly responsible for its being so nice. That is Sorolla's sentiment. He is a lyric poet, one of the familiar kind who goes about singing.

This subjective strain makes his realism intimately impressionistic. It made me eager to know the man, to shake him by the hand. And so I took the opportunity at Madrid last spring of visiting the painter in his new home. To my complete satisfaction he was just like his pictures. Whimsical, unconventional, jovial, kindly, the French would call him "Bon garçon." It is a familiar type in the studios of the world. But how few of them have the genius of this little Spaniard!

Sorolla was a charming host, putting my companions and myself at once at our ease by his almost boisterous familiarity, assuring us that although we were not painters, yet we were Americans, and therefore easy for him to like and understand. He spoke with enthusiasm of his friends in America, of his new commission to decorate the Hispanic Museum at New York with mural paintings, of his admiration for the American spirit, his belief that from us shall come the great art of the future. I drew him on to speak of his philosophy. He responded eagerly and with spontaneous eloquence. In answer to my remark that the distinguishing quality of his work seemed to be his responsiveness to the joyous influences of the world—he exclaimed that art has no business dealing with anything that is either ugly or sad. He had painted one pathetic picture of crippled children bathing in the sea. Emphatically he would never paint another like it; there was too much of that sort of thing in life. "Is it any wonder," he demanded, "that modern painters love the study of sunlight? Light is the life of everything it touches." And again a little later, "*La Lumière c'est la vie.*" Therefore the more light in pictures the more life, and the more truth, and the more beauty. Children, flowers, sunshine—yes, those were the things he loved best. And when I praised the beauty of his house and garden, he smiled as if remembering former doubts and compunctions about the realization of this expensive dream, and said very simply, "One can live only once. Let us be happy while we may."

To the foreigner Northern Spain does not seem a joyous country. Before my visit to Sorolla I had been much impressed by the almost tragic gloom of the tawny savage desert and the ancient-



AFTER THE BATH — JOAQUIN SOROLLA Y BASTIDA

COURTESY OF THE HISPANIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA

BEACHING THE BOAT — JOAQUIN SOROLLA Y BASTIDA

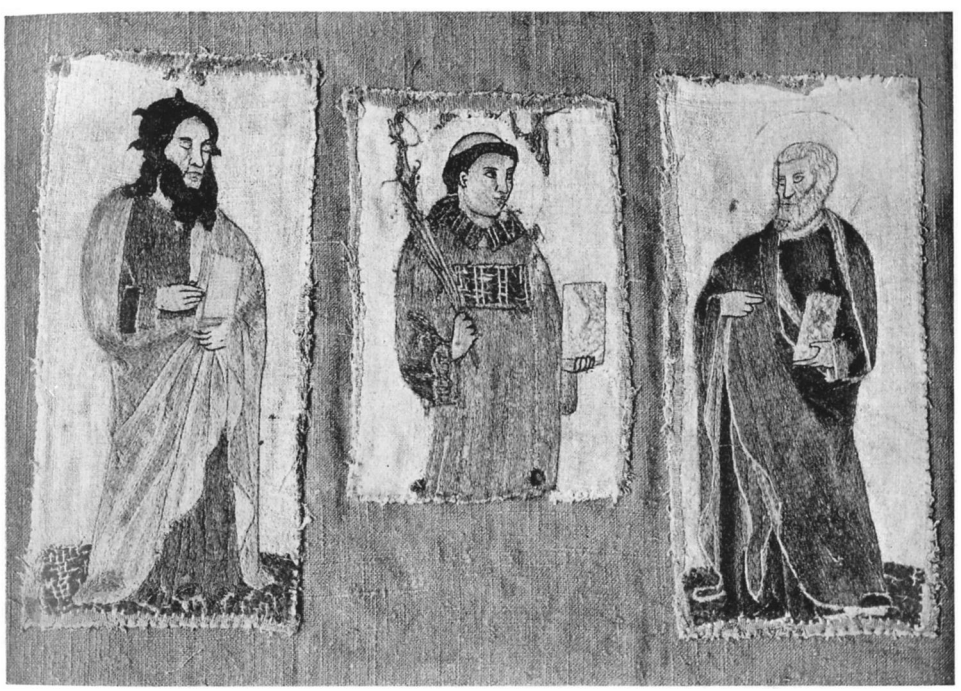
COURTESY OF THE HISPANIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA

walled, dust colored towns of Castile. I had reflected also upon the effect of such environment on the character of the people, and had satisfied myself, in the way of the sentimental tourist, that here was the explanation of the somber, cruel tastes, the hard and melancholy countenances of the people. Here was the reason for their love of the lurid, the sensational. In a desolate bad land even the warmest-hearted are known to grow more and more like their surroundings. I thought of El Greco, how something sinister and maddening had warped his genius as he walked the horror-haunted streets of grim Toledo. I thought of Goya and his fiendish delight in all that was cruel and carnal. I dreamed of the horrors of the Inquisition that was. With my own eyes I saw the atrocities of the Bull Fight that continues to be. A sardonic picture from the Paris Salon of 1912, by that other great living painter of Spain, Zuloaga, flashed before me in many a dark church and lonely road. It represented a group of peasants, their eyes shining and excited with the fascination of blood, gloating on the image of the tortured Christ upon his cross, under the calculating tutelage of a priest. And so, in the sunshine of Sorolla's presence, I said to him, "You do not seem characteristic of your race. You are lyric rather than theatric, preferring to find beauty that is normal rather than ugliness that is sensational. As yet I have seen nothing in Spain quite like you." But he would not agree. Southern Spain I would find as gay and care free as Italy, he declared. Even in the north the gloom I spoke of was largely a matter of climate and costume. I was thinking not of the true Spain, but of the Spain beloved of the Paris boulevards, the Spain of Theophile Gautier. As for the Bull Fight, he seldom went. The cruelties hurt him as they hurt us. But ah, the ravishing colors—ah, the brilliant spectacle; the amphitheater, half in shadow, half in golden light, the brilliant costumes of the Banderilleros, the god-like strength and grace of the Matadors. I confess I went away from my first and last Bull

Fight, believing more implicitly in the Spain of Zuloaga than of Sorolla. But I was all the more eager to remember the exquisite sweetness and gaiety of the man who could carry his sunshine about with him in his heart.

On the wall of his library hangs a print of one of Vermeer's serene interiors. Pointing to it he said significantly, *"le plus moderne des anciens."* In the work of that incomparable charmer it is easy to find just the qualities that would appeal to Sorolla—gaiety, love of sunlight, love of color. If Vermeer had lived in our free and frolicsome epoch of art his brush work would probably have been as big and brave as Sorolla's, and if Sorolla had been of the later seventeenth century in Holland, he might have been as "exquisite" as Vermeer. The "Old Master" responded with as great a gusto as the "modern impressionist" to momentary effects of beauty, especially when familiar objects took on delicious color in the light. Vermeer like Sorolla was a student of atmosphere, a realist in a big sense, a poet unconscious of his poetry.

When Sorolla had waved us good-bye at his hospitable gate, he sauntered back to his veranda and sat down. The last we saw of him he was sitting there, as all who know his pictures would wish him ever to be, basking in the sunlight, idly watching the opal shadows flickering on his garden wall.



EMBROIDERY, ENGLISH OF THE XIV CENTURY, VERY RARE AND ORIGINALLY FROM THE VICTOR GAY COLLECTION. LENT BY HENRY GOLDEN DEARTH, ESQ.

SOME RARE TEXTILES

THERE is now on exhibition in the Albright Gallery at Buffalo a notable collection of ancient textiles lent by collectors both in this country and abroad. The major part of the collection has been lent by Messrs. Bacri, well known critics of Paris, but Mr. Henry Golden Dearth, the artist, has